

# FOCUSING

## Primacy of Feeling is Really the Felt Sense

by Peter Afford

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*Using the word FEELINGS to refer to a 'THOUGHT' used to be the mark of an emotional illiterate among Humanistic Psychologists. Peter Afford shows us how we rob ourselves of the ability to grow if we stick rigidly to this idea*

We all know that feelings are central and key to psychotherapy and personal growth. But do we know what we really mean by feelings? The word is something of a catch-all, and we tend to apply it to just about any aspect of our experience that we wish to contrast with thinking.

In the growth world, there is a tendency to equate feeling with emotion. When I worked for a self-development seminar organisation a few years back, one course session had as its theme the motto "the fastest way to grow is to feel your feelings" (a slogan lifted from Werner Erhard I believe). Participants asked "how do you feel your feelings?" - not an easy question to answer! What actually happened was that a weekend workshop soon came along and then everyone was goaded to scream, throw up, pound mattresses and cry their way through as many boxes of tissue as possible.

### Complex Arrangement of Experience

Clearly, emotions are feelings, but are all feelings emotions? We say, "I feel..." when we talk of our emotions, but we also say "I feel ..." very loosely, often using it to refer to thinking and intuitive processes; however, now when I hear "I feel ...", I presume something is felt. For example, what lies behind the following common expressions?

"I don't feel quite right about this"

"I had a feeling you were going to say something like that"

"I feel like going to see a movie tonight"

Emotions? Not really - or if there is emotion behind such statements, it is of a rather minor nature, a slight discomfort or a little excitement. Other aspects of the experience, such as my needs, desires, impulses and intuitions, are more significant. Such funny little 'feelings' that are totally bound up with the current

situation are not feelings in the sense of "what are you feeling?" asked to a client in therapy, yet we live our lives on the basis that we do feel them.

Further, we often say "I feel ..." to refer to more complex arrangements of experience. Here's a perfect example I've just read from the diary of a participant at Schumacher College, published in the magazine *Resurgence*: "I feel a very curious sense of being put in my place, and yet at the same time of finding my place, and with it, not a feeling of belittlement but of reassurance and belonging." Here, "I feel ..." is used spontaneously, not to refer to a specific and clearly defined emotion, but to a complex inner experience that requires a careful choice of words to describe. This felt experience includes some emotional currents, yet is far more than just emotion. It is a whole experience, embracing thought, feeling and sensation.

### **The Felt Sense**

I believe that we have these more nebulous feelings and more complex webs of felt experience more often than we have the sort of readily identified feelings that come with clear identified labels.

So, when we say that someone is in touch with their feelings, we don't mean just that they repeatedly express anger, sadness, joy and so forth, but that they are in contact with a centred, in-the-body and uniquely personal realm of experiencing. Feeling energy or quality is apparent in this person's behaviour and expression; they have access to their emotions but may or may not be emotional much of the time. Whilst the ability to express emotion is an important factor in psychological development, there is no evidence I'm aware of that more emotional people are more psychologically mature than less emotional people. There is something confusing us in this business of our "feelings".

Many therapists recognise that just expressing emotion is insufficient for therapy to work. But can they say what it is that fills the rest of the equation of effective therapy? I believe we can be specific in answering this question, and the diagram of different levels of feeling points towards it.

I put emotions at the point of the triangle because they tend to be an energetic outward expression; that's highly visible to other people; and that are easy to name (anger, sadness, joy etc.). Feelings come one level down: they are only partially visible to others; are less charged than emotions; may or may not be expressed; and require a wider vocabulary to name them accurately. At the base of the triangle, at the broad, ground-floor level of experience is the little-known



concept of the felt sense, of which the nebulous feelings and complex arrangements of experience mentioned above are examples. Felt senses are fundamental to our human experiencing, in therapy and in life generally, and everybody experiences them. Yet many people pay little attention to them, and almost everyone gets confused about what they are.

### **Eugene Gendlin**

To contrast the felt sense with emotions and feelings, I would say that it is a complex experience that brings together feeling, thinking, intuiting etc. functions; it is frequently missed and is not very visible (e.g. there may just be a spoken "ah ..." or a slight contraction in the breathing); it's hard to name because of its peculiarity to the person at that time; it can be hard to express because it needs time, space, an uncritical environment and an inner confidence or connectedness to do so; writing it or expressing it artistically is sometimes the easiest way to express it; and it often contains within it an 'edge' which, if attended to, leads to an expansion of consciousness as something subliminal or unconscious is made manifest; and finally, there is, to borrow a phrase of James Hillman, "soul-making". If this sounds rather grand, let me add that attending to a felt sense is usually quite undramatic, and what comes is often small and slight in nature.

The term "felt sense" was originally coined a while back by Dr Eugene Gendlin, a psychologist and philosopher at the University of Chicago, and the creator of the 'focusing' method described in the book of the same name. Gendlin came up with this term after researching into successful and unsuccessful outcomes in therapy, and finding that the common thread of the 'successful' clients was not so much their level of emotional expression (though he would not deny the value of this), but rather their instinctive habit of paying attention to a 'something' they could feel or sense inside about some aspect of their lives, staying with it until it opened up in some way. These 'somethings' were a different kind of beast from emotional feelings, and he called them felt senses. By the term 'focusing' he means not the usual meaning of mental concentration, but the way the unclear edges of our experiencing can come into focus when we sit patiently with a relaxed and centred and curious kind of attentiveness.

### **Body-felt Sense**

This territory of focusing and felt senses should not be unfamiliar to therapists and people concerned with psychological development. When a therapy session works well, there will most likely be a natural focusing process somewhere in it. All therapists want their clients to focus some of the time during their sessions, in the way of paying close attention to their authentic inner experience, that is, their bodily-felt sense of a situation. Yet what happens at these times is

almost always discussed and understood in terms of the psychological content of the session, rather than the inner process dynamic that is regardless of the content. This is because we lack a differentiation in our appreciation of what is happening beyond generalities like 'expressing feelings', 'going deeper', 'being real' and so forth. Gendlin's work, and that of many others in the focusing community, looks at the specifics of this all-important but mysterious and intangible aspect of psychotherapy.

We actually refer to felt senses in lots of well-known but indirect ways. For example, "the place you're coming from" is one of these; that 'place' is rarely one single feeling, but a whole complexity in the way the person actually carries that part of his life experience in his whole body. When speaking from that 'place', he is in touch with that complexity, that is his currently-experienced felt sense. If he is not in touch with it, attempts to deal with the issue at hand are liable to be in vain. We use phrases like "you're really in touch with this" and "now I feel connected inside" in the same way.

### **Therapy and Self-Help**

We use the word 'something' to refer to the edge of the felt sense we are aware of just now; for example - "there's something about this person I rather like ", where it would take some exploration, some trying out of this and trying out of that idea to find out what is unknown yet sensed in that 'something'; when you finally get it (and you may have to be patient), then there's a sigh, some relief - "oh, that's what it is, ah, yes". The sort of process we go through in these cases can be much more intricate than simply 'expressing my feelings'.

How can this insight be of practical use? Psychotherapy is one area of application. In learning the subtle language and dynamics of felt senses and focusing behaviour, therapists can direct their responses and interventions more accurately to the client's actual current experience, including the parts of it that are sensed but unclearly. There is much in the focusing world to aid the direct communication of the therapist's empathy, or, to put it another way, to enter into the client's 'frame of reference' rather than the therapist's - basic areas of counselling practice that require considerable skill and that can be developed far beyond just a basic level of rapport and trust. I have often noticed that whilst therapists usually have a high level of focusing skill for themselves, they do not know well how to encourage the same skill in their clients. Instead, they hope in some way that the client's focusing ability will develop of its own accord. However, Gendlin's original research showed that clients with poor focusing ability tended not to get any better at it, which surprised him greatly and which prompted him to devise a teachable focusing methodology. Apart from specifically teaching focusing as a skill, it can be combined in an unseen way with just about any mode of therapy, to from which Gendlin has dubbed 'experiential therapy'.

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combined with any  
therapy*

Another area is that of self-help, and the focusing community practises both peer-level partnership arrangements and focusing alone as a meditative and 'instant-therapy' technique. If you can learn to go to your felt sense and stay with it, you can guide your own process (having a listener generally makes it easier); because of the subtlety and intricacy of individual experience, such self-guided inner process is sometimes more effective than putting yourself in the hands of even the best of therapists - and always cheaper! Of course, not everyone is ready for this, but many people are. Focusing on your own or with a friend is flexible, friendly, helpful and delightful. Finally, people find that knowing about the felt sense is helpful in life in a general sense - to accept rather than try to change our experience, to be friendly rather than critical towards ourselves and each other, and to listen more deeply to all our differing and complex inner worlds. The territory that it opens seems so immense and so little explored, even in the psychotherapeutic and personal growth world, that I'm quite sure I for one will be rummaging around in it for the rest of my life.

## **From: HOW TO FEEL REBORN (1985)**

**by Nicholas Albery**

**with commentaries by Stan Grof, Janov, R.D. Laing and Leonard Orr**

In supervision, I have found subsequent remarks by R.D. Laing about another client illuminating concerning Gerry and clients like him:

"It is useful", Laing said, "to think of some clients in terms of an embryology of the soul or of the mind. The main thing in such therapy is that the therapist is in a sense the client's womb, carrying him whilst he goes through it. The therapist has this maternal function. It's not a matter of the therapist doing anything about this, although if he is too frightened to participate with the client, that can abort the process, as can catastrophic anxiety on the part of the client. All the therapist has to do is to follow it and be there, and to be aware of the evolution.

One can regard it as a psychological pregnancy. The therapist is mother and womb, the client is in the womb, and it's important to avoid confusion in going through it again, not to get caught up in the catastrophe that happened with his own mother.

The dangers he ran into before will hurt him again, come at him, attack him. It is not a regression, in a sense of repeating. Words that I've tentatively employed are 'neo-genesis' or 'regeneration'.

Therapy can proceed in perhaps two or three rounds, each like the nine months of pregnancy, with the end of each lap taking the client into either an emergence or a birth".